

Standing In The Truth

2 Thessalonians 2:13-17

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In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17 Paul says, “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because...”—here’s his reason—“...God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father, who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation...”—or “encouragement” or “strength”—“...and good hope by grace, comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.”

The key to this section is verse 15: Paul said, “Therefore, brethren...”—here’s the application —“...stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle.” The believers in Thessalonica were in danger of being swept off course by the winds of deception. So Paul wanted them to “stand fast” and hold on to the traditions that they had been taught.

They were in a storm. The waves were breaking over the boat, and they were hanging on. Paul doesn’t want them to be swept overboard. He wants them to be strong and hold on to the traditions that they had been taught.

In chapter 1 of 2 Thessalonians, they were facing persecution, so Paul wrote to encourage them. In chapter 3, they were facing temptation, so Paul wrote to exhort them. Now in chapter 2, they were facing deception, so Paul wrote to enlighten them. Here at the end of chapter 2, they were facing the danger of deception, so Paul wants them to “stand fast,” verse 15, and to hold on to the truth. Back in 1 Thessalonians 3:8, Paul said, “For now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.” Then in 2 Thessalonians 2:2, he said, “...not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled.”

Even today there is a real need, as God’s people, to stand in the truth and not to be shaken or troubled and not to be moved. What a troubling week it was for America. How our hearts were shaken and troubled. But in so many ways, I think we are still missing the root of the problem. It is the problem of men’s hearts. The Bible says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Who can know it?” Jesus said, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that [you] may have life, and that [you] may have it more abundantly.”

We have forsaken God, we have forsaken God’s Word, and we have sown to the wind and are reaping the whirlwind in America today. And the solution is not necessarily passing new laws. The solution is turning back to God, so that we have a revival in our nation. The Christians are to hang on to the truth, speak out the truth and live the truth in their daily lives.

How can we stand and not be shaken in the midst of this dark and troubled world? I want to give you three things you need to do in relationship to the truth of God's Word. Number one, we need to believe the truth. In verses 13-14, Paul gives thanks for their salvation. These verses are kind of a soteriology 101. In the subject of systematic theology, the doctrine of salvation is the doctrine of soteriology, how God saves sinners. Paul takes all this information and pours it into verses 13-14.

So when Paul thinks about them, he is thankful for them. Paul says, "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth, to which He called you by our gospel, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ."

I want to set the context of these verses. Notice that verse 13 starts with a "but." It's kind of what you call a disjunctive conjunction. It's connected, but it goes a different way. It's like a hinge on a door; it helps the door swing different directions. From verses 1-12 of chapter 2, Paul is turning from the Antichrist and Satan's lies to God's truth and Jesus Christ. So he goes from the darkness of the Antichrist being revealed, the judgment and the wrath of God being poured out on people who don't believe the truth, people who reject the truth, people who have pleasure in unrighteousness to a contrast. He says, "But we...beloved by the Lord"; he's rejoicing because God has saved them by His grace.

In verse 2, Paul says, "...not to be soon shaken..."—notice the word "shaken"—"...in mind or troubled..."—notice the word "troubled"—"...either by spirit...—someone prophesied falsely—"...or by word..."—someone said the word came from Paul—"...or by letter as if from us ..."—someone falsified a letter with Paul's signature—"...as though the day of Christ had come." "Day of Christ" is better translated "Day of the Lord." It refers to the tribulation period technically running all the way through the millennial reign of Christ. Paul, in context, is talking about the aspect of "the day of the Lord," which is when God's wrath is poured out upon a Christ-rejecting world.

Notice that they were "shaken" and "troubled." And verse 3 says, "Let no one deceive you." That's the problem; they were shaken and troubled because they were being deceived by false teachers. Paul says, "for that Day..."—that is, "the day of the Lord"—"...will not come unless the falling away comes first..."—this is that apostasy, the turning away from the faith—"...and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition." That's the Antichrist. Two things have to happen for us to be in the tribulation period: there has to be an apostasy, a "falling away" from the faith, and then there has to be a revelation or unveiling of this "man of sin," the Antichrist.

As we look at the world around us today getting darker and darker, becoming more deceptive and more deceived and demonically energized, we see that Satan is at work today in the world. But don't be "shaken," be not "troubled," don't be deceived.

Then the Antichrist will be revealed, verse 8. He will come and set up his image in the temple, command people to worship him, will deceive many, but "the Lord will consume [him] with the

breath of His mouth and destroy [him] with the brightness of His coming.” Verses 9-11, “The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish...”—why?—“...because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie.” So they reject the truth and they believe a lie. God allows them to go their sinful way. Verse 12, “...that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.” Then don’t miss the connection with verse 13: “But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord.”

So Paul goes from this dark passage of the demonically energized Antichrist, the deception he brings and the judgment it brings on people who reject the truth to the fact that the Thessalonians had received the truth, had believed the truth and God had set His love upon them and saved them by His mercy and His grace, as He does for us. So there is an intended contrast between the unbelieving world that is deceived and judged and the believing world that has believed the truth of God and is saved.

The words “we” and “you” in verse 13 are emphatic in the Greek. Paul says, “We...”—that is, “Apostles”—“...are bound to give thanks to God for you.” Then he lists the things that he is thankful for.

And what was Paul thankful for? In the text, he was technically thankful for two things. But I’m going to turn them into six things. Technically, Paul was thankful that God had chosen them, verse 13, and called them, verse 14. But I want to break down each little phrase in this passage.

Number one, Paul was thankful that they were loved by God, verse 13: “brethren beloved by the Lord.” Salvation starts in the heart of God. It’s not man’s idea. In the book of Jonah it says, “Salvation is of the Lord.” It is God setting His love upon you. Why? Because He loves us. I don’t know why but He does.

You say, “Wait a minute, Pastor John. Don’t you know that I’m loveable?”

Have you seen that old bumper sticker that says, “To know me is to love me”? Every time I see that I say, “I don’t think so.” Who would put that on their car? But God knows you, and He loves you anyway.

So “beloved” reminds us that God loves us, and Paul also said that he loves them too. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Salvation starts with the love of God in the heart of God. And if you’re a Christian, God set His love upon you. And when God sets His love upon you, He acts toward you in what is called “grace,” giving you what you don’t deserve, but giving you “mercy,” not giving you what you do deserve. So God set His grace and mercy upon you.

Number two, in verse 13, Paul was thankful because they were chosen by God. “God from the beginning chose you for salvation.” When did He choose us? “...from the beginning.” This is what is called “the doctrine of election.”

Very few preachers want to deal with this doctrine. I’m a little weary trying to defend this truth in the Bible, but it’s taught in the Bible. Instead of wrestling with it, just accept it. If you are truly a Christian—that is, you’ve been born again and regenerated by the Spirit—you are chosen, because God chose you. Period.

It’s not because you’re good looking. It’s not because you’re charismatic. It’s not because you’re wonderful and amazing, and God needed you on His team. The Bible says, “God has chosen the foolish things...the weak things...the base things...the things which are despised... that no flesh should glory in His presence.” God looked at you and said, “There is a candidate for My glory. If I save that person, it’ll blow everybody’s mind. They’ll say, ‘That must be God. Look what God has done!’ I will get all the glory.” So He chooses you not because of what you are or what you’ve done. Because of His love, He chose you by His grace.

So I believe this is the doctrine of election saved by sovereign grace. And I don’t want to weaken or diminish that. I want to be faithful to the Scriptures. There are many cross-references for this, and one is Ephesians 1:4, in which Paul says, “He...”—referring to “God the Father”—“...chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love.” Before time began, God chose you. In eternity past, you were chosen by God. So Jesus said, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you.”

All this does is humble me. Why would God choose me? It’s so amazing.

Now this doctrine of election is not the same as predestination. Election is God’s choice of you. Predestination is God’s purpose and plan for you. So God chooses you, and He has purposed ahead of time what to do with you. It’s like, “Now that I’ve chosen him, what do I do with him?” In this text we’ll see that He will take us to heaven and “We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.” So simply stated, divine election is taught here in this passage.

Number three, Paul was thankful because they were sanctified by God, verse 13. This is a reference to His Holy Spirit. “God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit.” It is by the work of the Holy Spirit in our salvation that you are sanctified. No one becomes a Christian without the Holy Spirit working in their life.

Even in your unregenerated state, the Holy Spirit convicts you of your sin, of your unrighteousness and of your need of a savior. If you come to Jesus, you come born out of a sense of sinfulness. You don’t just “try” Jesus or “check out” Jesus; you come saying, “I need Jesus because I’m on my way to hell. I need the Savior. Jesus died and rose from the dead. I trust Him to save me.” That’s how you come to Christ. That’s all the work of the Holy Spirit. So he convicts us, and you might say that He draws us to Jesus.

But that drawing of the Holy Spirit is resistible. You have the free will to say “No” to God. But if

you don't resist and then believe, the Holy Spirit regenerates you and comes inside you to dwell. He fills you, guides you, directs you, teaches you the Word of God and transforms you.

All of this is under the umbrella of sanctification through the Holy Spirit. In John 20:31, John is giving the purpose statement of his Gospel. He says, "These are written..."—referring to the Gospel of John—"...that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." So regeneration happens the moment you believe and trust in Jesus Christ. But it is the work of the Holy Spirit in your heart.

Now notice number four: they believed the truth of God. Verse 13, "...and belief in the truth." Now this is in time. So in eternity past, God loved you; God chose you; God sent His Spirit to draw, convict, regenerate and indwell you. Then you believed the truth and were saved. This is what we might call "man's side of salvation."

This is where the crux comes in. "Well, Pastor John, didn't you just tell us that 'God drew us, God chose us and God regenerated us'?" Yes, that's true. But you can resist that, not believe, say "No" to God and you will be judged for your sins. Instead of Jesus paying for your sins on the Cross, then you will have to die and be separated from God for all eternity. So I don't believe in what's called "irresistible grace." It's resistible.

You say, "Well, I don't understand. How does that work?" I don't know how it works either. I can't explain it, because it's not revealed. Both are taught in Scripture: God chooses us and we must repent and believe in Him.

So Paul goes from eternity past to the present, and he talks about how we believe the truth. How important that is.

Notice the fifth thing Paul was thankful for, in verse 14: they were called by God. "...to which He called you by our gospel." Again, the God who has ordained the end, the salvation of sinners, has ordained the means to that end by the preaching of the Gospel. So we must "Go into all the world and preach the gospel."

You say, "Well, what if they're not the elect?" We still preach the Gospel. Let God take care of that. God will work in hearts, and they can either resist or believe and be saved. So I believe in a "whosoever" Gospel, as John 3:16 says. Christ died for the world. "Whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

So our part is to preach the Gospel. In Romans 1:16 Paul says, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." Then in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, Paul actually describes what the Gospel is: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..."—the Gospel involves our sin and our need of a Savior—"...and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." That's the Gospel that we preach, that you hear, that you believe and then you are saved. It's so very important.

Now notice number six: they will enjoy the glory of God, verse 14. "...for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." The end of our salvation is the glory of the Lord. What begins with grace ends in glory. The Bible says, "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Christ Jesus," Philippians 1:6. So God starts a work, God finishes and completes a work. How important that is.

In Romans 8:28, Paul says the same thing in a different way. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." What this verse doesn't mean is that if you lose your job, you'll get a better one. It doesn't mean that if your car blows up you can say, "Oh, praise the Lord! It works for me! I'm going to get a better car." No; you might get a worse car. That's not what this verse is talking about.

Yes, God providentially blesses us and takes care of us and guides us, but He's not promising you that better things are going to happen. In the context, notice what the better things are. Verses 29-31 say, "For whom He foreknew..."—that's the same concept of God loving you, setting His love upon you—"...He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified..."—or "declared righteous"—"...and whom He justified, these He also glorified. What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

Back in 2 Thessalonians 2, that's what Paul is saying; he's saying that you're loved by God, you were chosen by God, you were sanctified by the Spirit, you believed the truth, you were called by the Gospel and you obtained the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you're a Christian, I can tell you where you're headed. To heaven. That's good news. Now maybe it won't happen today, but that's where you're going. How important that is to realize.

Now why would Paul say what he said in verses 13-14? The answer is to comfort and encourage and strengthen the hearts of the Thessalonian believers. The great Greek scholar, A.T. Robertson, said that verses 13-14 are "a soft pillow for weary hearts" in a troubled world. God loves you, He's chosen you, He has set you apart, He has called you by the Gospel, He has given you His Spirit, He has made you His child and you will obtain glory. So you need to hang onto that and rest your soul upon that.

The second thing you need to do in relationship to God's Word is in verse 15. Not only should we believe the truth in order to be saved, but we should hold on steadfastly to the truth. "Therefore, brethren..." The old rule is that where there is a "therefore," find out what it is there for. Because God has chosen you, called you, saved you by His grace and taking you to glory, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word..."—the "oral traditions" or "teachings"—"...or our epistle," which are the writings of the Apostles. So the oral teaching of the Apostles had apostolic authority, and the writings of the Apostles we find in the Scriptures have authority.

Paul's exhortation in verse 15 is to be faithful to God's truth. In verses 13-14, Paul is thankful for them; in verse 15, he is exhorting them to hang on, to hold on to the truth. It's a word of exhortation.

Remember in chapter 2, verse 3, there was going to be an apostasy, a falling away. So now he's telling them not to do that but to stand, to hold on to the truth they had been given.

The statement "stand fast and hold the traditions" are both present imperatives in the Greek. It means they are commands that are to be continually obeyed. Or "Keep holding on. Keep standing fast. Keep faithful to the Word of God."

And when he uses the word "traditions," don't misunderstand that. He's not talking about man-made traditions that are not Biblical or Scriptural; he's talking about oral teachings that are given by the Apostles that are of authority. So he was talking about what we know today as Scripture, the Bible. We have it in the Scriptures. We don't hear their voices, but we read them on the pages of the Bible.

How do we stand fast and hold on in this troubled, dark, demonically energized world? Let me give you eight ways to hold fast to God's Word. Number one, by believing it. In John 6:68-69, it says by believing in God's Word. "Simon Peter answered Him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also, we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"

Number two, by honoring God's Word, Job 23:12. The writer of Job says, "I have not departed from the commandment of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food."

Number three, to love God's Word, Psalm 119:97. The psalmist says, "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day."

Number four, study God's Word, Ezra 7:10. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel."

Number five, to guard God's Word, 1 Timothy 6:20. Paul instructed Timothy. "O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge."

Number six, contending or fighting for God's Word, Jude 3. "Contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints." It means that we actually fight for the truth of God's Word.

Number seven, we preach God's Word, 2 Timothy 4:2-5. Paul told Timothy, "Preach the word!" He used the word "kérussó" or "proclaim" or "herald" God's Word. And he told him how to preach God's Word: "...in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching." Why? "For the time will come when they will not endure sound

doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you..."—"Timothy"—"...be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

So no matter how difficult, no matter how out of vogue or out of season the preaching of the Word is, preach the Word. That's what it means to "stand fast" and to hold on. We proclaim God's Word.

And number eight, we obey God's Word, James 1:22. He said, "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." We need to put into practice what we believe. Also, 1 John 2:5 says, "Whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him."

Are you steadfastly holding on to the truth of God's Word? Only you can answer that.

This is so painful for me; for 47 years as a pastor, I've watched the decline and the deception of the professing church. I think we are witnessing the apostasy in the last days. It's called "postmodernism," "liberalism" and "neo-orthodoxy." Basically its proponents are systematically still claiming to be evangelical Christians, but they are deconstructing orthodox Christianity and interpreting it as they see fit through the lens of postmodernism relativism.

When you see what's going on in our culture today, in the degeneration of our culture, you wonder where their brains are. Where are their minds? The only answer I can get from the Bible is Romans 1. Verse 18 says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteous of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." They reject the truth and in its place, they believe a lie. Verse 24, "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness," and verse 28, "God gave them over to a debased mind."

America has told God we don't want Him. We want Him out of our public schools, out of the public arena. Then we go into the public schools that we have taken God out of—taken out the Bible, taken out Christian teaching—and we teach our children that they are the product of evolution. They're just highly developed animals. Yet when they act like animals, we wonder what's going on. And we think we can pass new laws to solve the problems.

But the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. We are right now experiencing the judgment of God on America because of our sin. You can't abort 60 million babies since the inception of Roe v. Wade and then not expect God to judge America. Billy Graham said, "If God does not judge America, He owes Sodom and Gomorrah an apology."

It's time to repent, time to turn back to God. It's time to see that we need God. Instead of fighting over political issues, we should be coming to God in prayer, kneeling before God, humbly crying out to God. We have rejected God and done what Hosea 8:7 says, "They sow the wind, and reap the whirlwind."

And where does the road back start? With you and me. It takes us holding on to and not compromising the truth. It takes us not listening to the world's philosophies.

Our culture has wholly bought the postmodern lie that there is no absolute truth. I've talked to college kids and asked them, "Do you believe in absolute truth?"

"No."

Then I ask them, "Is that statement true?"

They aren't sure what to say, so they say, "Uh, maybe there's one truth. The one truth is that there's no truth." How convenient. It's self-defeating. They don't realize the foolishness of their belief. Their minds have become debased. They have no comprehension of right and wrong or of what is true and what isn't true.

Our society has no comprehension of reality. You can make up your own reality; it can be whatever you want it to be. We bought the lie, and the stage is set for the Antichrist and for the darkness of the tribulation.

So what we need to do as believers right now is to stand on God's truth and hold fast to what we believe, to orthodox Christianity. Don't listen to the world's philosophies. Don't listen to the relativistic teachings of the world. Stand for the objective truth of God's Word, and build your life upon it.

My third main point is in verses 16-17. In verses 13-14, Paul thanked God for the Thessalonian believers. In verse 15, Paul exhorted them to stand fast and hold on. Now in verses 16-17, Paul prays for them. It's a benedictory prayer.

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and our God and Father..."—this is the only time that Jesus is mentioned first in sequential order before God the Father—"...who has loved us and given us everlasting consolation..." "Consolation" is tied in with the word "parakletos," referencing the Holy Spirit and Him strengthening and encouraging us. And it's everlasting. Continuing, "...and good hope..."—that's the hope of the believer—"...by grace..." It all comes to us because of the love, mercy and grace of God. Then he closes with this prayer: "...comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work." The words "comfort your hearts" speak of an inward courage, and the words "establish you" speak of an outward steadfastness.

This is a beautiful prayer of benediction as Paul closes this section. He is praying that God may comfort you and strengthen you in everything you say and in everything you do. So what a marvelous truth that is.

There are three ways to wrap up this section. Number one, thanking God for His salvation, verses 13-14. "Thank you, God, that You love me; that from the beginning You chose me for salvation; that You are sanctifying me by Your Spirit; that I was able to believe the truth—by faith

and trusting You for salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; that You called me in time by hearing the Gospel; and that I obtained the glory of God by the Lord Jesus Christ.” So instead of analyzing it and arguing about it, just thank God for it.

You ask, “Well, what if I’m not chosen?” Just repent, believe in Jesus Christ, put your faith in Him and you’ll find out you were chosen.

“Well, I don’t understand that.” Neither do I. But the Bible says, “The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” God’s not going to say, “I’m sorry; you’re not one of the elect.” “Whoever believes” will be saved.

If you reject the truth, you have no one to blame but yourself.

Number two, hold on to God’s inspired, inerrant, infallible Word, the Bible, verse 15. It is the solid rock of our foundation.

And the reason why America is all messed up right now is because we’ve gotten away from the Bible. “The B-i-b-l-e. Yes that’s the book for me.” If we would get back to the Bible, we would be a blessed nation. And if the churches of America are not preaching from God’s Word, then we’re at fault. If the pulpits of America were preaching the Word, America would be transformed. It’s that simple.

You are “the light of the world.” You are “the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor...it is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men,” Matthew 5:13-14. So we need to hang on to God’s Word. Know what you believe and why you believe it.

Number three, rely upon God’s strength, verses 16-17. Paul says, “...comfort your hearts and establish you in every good word and work.” He ends with prayer. So the Word of God and prayer strengthens these believers. It’s not enough to know your doctrine; you must pray and ask God to empower you by His Spirit to put it into practice.

I wish that even as Christians, as husbands and wives, as parents we would turn back to God in our homes. That we would pray with our children. That we would read the Bible with our children. That we would teach our children. That we would disciple our children. That we would teach them to think critically and Biblically about life. We’ve shoved our children off into the public arena without a foundation under them, the Word of God. It’s no wonder they’ve been blown by the winds of deception.

So bring the Bible into your life—into your marriage, into your parenting, into your home, into the church, into the children’s ministry, into the youth ministry. Let’s build on the Word of God. And then let’s pray and ask the Holy Spirit to empower us, to fill us, to live out the Word of God in our marriages, in our homes and in our parenting.